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ABSTRACT

A modified, chronologically-based approach to the foreign language literature survey course integrates traditional elements of chronological organization with critical and concrete analysis of literary texts to increase the significance of the material to the liberal arts education. Research in higher education and research on left-right brain hemisphere activity support the presentation of literature in such a fashion, with progression from concrete to abstract and from critical to creative thinking. The application of the principles of the three-stage learning cycle (exploration and discovery of the material; concept introduction; and concept application and repetition) to a specific literary excerpt ("L'Esprit des Lois") illustrates the holistic involvement of the learner in the text. Such a logical organization of the survey course would appear to be requisite to developing critical thinking skills if the student is not to wander in the domain of abstractions without properly understanding the relationship of the part to the whole. Through this mixture of chronological survey, generalizations concerning literary works and movements in their sociocultural setting, and close textual analysis, a meld of European and American philosophies results. (MSE)

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The Survey With a Focus:

Developing Critical and Creative Thinking Skills

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In the past five to ten years, innovative approaches to the teaching of foreign language have blossomed, with emphasis on the elementary and intermediate levels of basic skills instruction. Literature courses have received rather less attention in our foreign language journals, and survey courses in particular have perhaps received least innovative attention of all. In the late seventies, attempts were made to center pedagogic interest on interdisciplinary approaches to the survey, on approaches of developing communicative competence through reading skills in the survey, and on the need for flexible, individualized approaches recognizing the difficult transition from the language classroom to the literature classroom.[1] Much of this research has equally emphasized the need to maintain traditional, humanistic curricular needs in the process of implementing innovations and the need to recognize the fundamental complexity of curricular innovation at the survey level.[2] This paper will largely concern itself with the

[1] Paula Gilbert Lewis, "Practical Problems and Solutions for Teacher Re-Preparation for Interdisciplinary Foreign Language and Literature Courses," *Foreign Language Annals*, 11 (1978), pp. 315-17; M. Jane Greenewald, "Developing Communicative Competence in Oral Reading," *French Review*, 54 (1980), pp. 121-24; June K. Phillips, "Second Language Reading: Teaching Decoding Skills," *Foreign Language Annals*, 8 (1975), pp. 227-32; George Klin, "Our Unrealistic Language Program," *French Review*, 42 (1969), pp. 722-24; David J. Klein, "An Individualized Approach to a Literary Text," *Foreign Language Annals*, 9 (1976), pp. 548-50; and Emily Spinelli and Shirley A. Williams, "From Language to Literature: Teaching Figurative Language in the College Foreign Language Class," *Foreign Language Annals*, 14 (1981), pp. 37-43.

[2] For example, Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 316; Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 548; Renate A. Schulz, "Back to Basics in the Foreign Language Classroom?" *Foreign Language Annals*, 11 (1978), pp. 647-55; and Albert Valdman and Helen P. Warriner-Burke, "Major Surgery Due: Redesigning the Syllabus and Texts," *Foreign Language Annals*, 13 (1980), pp. 261-70.

theoretical implications of encouraging a modified chronologically-based approach to the survey, with a primary focus on developing critical and creative thinking skills in a holistic and heuristic setting.

In a recent article, it was pointed out that "foreign language classes across the U.S. have begun to question the many facets of culture and the problem of language itself, which is quite opposed to their traditional concentration on the recitation and memorization of the usual presentation of artificial dialogues and grammar rules."[3] At the more advanced levels of language learning, too, teachers at the cutting edge of the profession must question the role and format of the traditional survey of literature course, with its heavy, fragmentary emphasis on chronology, genre development, and literary movements at the expense of a holistic approach involving the language learner's total response—i.e. both cognitive and affective—to literature, as well as of the heuristic approach of using the literature and reading process itself to teach the various processes of critical and creative thinking.

An "integrated" survey course should mingle the traditional elements of chronological organization with a critical and concrete analysis of literary texts in order to heighten the broader significance of foreign language and literary training to the student's liberal arts education. Such a course can be a locus for the convergence of many of the diverse humanistic goals of higher education. For basic goals and objectives elucidate the organization of such a modified approach for the student. The purpose of the two-semester survey thus structured is fourfold: 1) to gain a broad, synoptic view of French literature and its cultural, socio-political background from the medieval to the contemporary periods; 2) to become familiar with the greatest authors, most influential thinkers, and major literary masterpieces from these periods; 3) to read closely and accurately selections from French literary masterpieces with emphasis on meticulous textual comprehension and analysis, and 4) to develop basic skills in the French critical technique of *explication de texte*. The first two goals treat the broad, humanistic concerns of the survey in general, while the last two goals treat the need for the total immersion (both at the affective and cognitive levels) of the student in the literary text itself, thereby enhancing and developing his/her critical and creative thinking skills. Such a course moves the student necessarily from concrete knowledge to abstract thinking skills.

The implementation of Piagettian research into the realm of higher education argues strongly in favor of presenting the literature in such an

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[3]Richard G. Knapp and Sandra C. Obergfell, "Teaching Creative and Critical Thinking Skills Through Foreign Language," *North Carolina Foreign Language Journal*, 1 (1983), pp. 4-5.

organized fashion, preferably chronological, thereby facilitating the student's grasp of the concrete facts concerning the corpus of literature being studied.[4] The American student in higher education has traditionally been weak in abstract reasoning skills, often operating at the abstract level less than 25-50% of the time, and such a student must be led from the concrete (i.e. dates, names, biographical facts, sociocultural background, and close literal study of the texts on the lexical and syntatic levels) to the abstract (i.e. figurative connotations of a text, the level of inferencing and intuiting meaning) and hence to a more creative approach to the literature in question and to thought processes in general. Surveys which forego such a movement from the concrete to the abstract may emphasize the affective interaction of a student with the text or theme to the detriment of the cognitive, or vice versa.

Theoretical support for this modified approach is to be found in research on left-right hemispheric activity of the brain. Critical thinking must come first, as educational psychologists have begun to argue, before creative thinking can logically take place.[5] If we neglect the traditional critical approaches to the texts in a survey course, we will ostensibly defeat our own purposes in innovations on behalf of heightened creativity. A combination of the activity of the left hemisphere of the brain (the rational, analytical part), and the right hemisphere of the brain (the intuitive, imaginative, and abstract part), takes place in finding the meaning of the text via *explication*. The student in *explication* is led systematically to make abstractions, to conceive ideas about the text, by means of the socratic method of questioning the meaning and establishing a dialogue with the text itself. The student *must* make the leap from the cognitive to the affective realm by intuiting or inferencing meaning from the literary text, thereby becoming holistically involved in the text itself.[6]

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[4]Rodney C. Killian and Catherine M. Warrick, "Steps to Abstract Reasoning: An Interdisciplinary Program for Cognitive Development," *Alternative Higher Education*, 4 (1980), pp. 189-200, and T. C. Campbell and R. G. Fuller, "A Teacher's Guide to the Learning Cycle: A Piagettian Approach to College Instruction," in *Accent on Developing Abstract Processes of Thought* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Monographs, 1976), pp. 9-28.

[5]Joseph Abinum, "Creativity and Education: Some Critical Remarks," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 14 (1981), pp. 17-29.

[6]Aaron S. Carton, "The Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study," Office of Education Contracts 4-14-021 and 5-14-024 (mimeo); Aaron S. Carton, "Inferencing: A Process in Using and Learning Foreign Language," in *The Psychology of Second Language Learning*, ed. Paul Pimsleur and Terence Quinn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 57-58; Henri Niedzielski, "Le Contexte, le raisonnement et l'intuition dans l'apprentissage individualisé de la lecture," *French Review*, 52 (1979), pp. 575-83; Victor E. Hanzeli, "The Effectiveness of Cloze Tests in Measuring the Competence of Students of

An example of the practical application of the four basic goals and objectives cited above to a specific literary excerpt demonstrates the holistic involvement of the learner, as advocated by Dewey, and the heuristic approach to literature.[7] In moving the literature student from the concrete to the abstract, we might follow the three-stage learning cycle proposed by Killian and Warrick in their application of Piagettian research to higher education: 1) exploration and discovery of the material, 2) concept introduction, and 3) concept application and repetition.[8]

In Stage 1, students are to be in direct contact with the new subject matter to be learned, in this case, a literary excerpt, and are to be given minimal instruction about how to proceed in their understanding of the material. In this stage, the student is assigned the reading and translation of an excerpt from Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois* and is asked certain questions bearing on his/her personal relationship to the text (i.e. his/her personal experience with governance and sovereignty in relation to that proposed by Montesquieu).

In Stage 2, the concepts of the excerpt are to be introduced to the student, usually by means of a traditional lecture on the material. Such a lecture would include the sociocultural background and spirit of *L'Esprit des Lois*, its prominence in the *Siècle des Lumières*, Montesquieu's rôle as a *philosophe*, a discussion of the Enlightenment and its relationship to the development of American government and institutions, and the Enlightenment as a distinctive period in French history. The excerpt is thus set in the mainstream of ideas with which the student may have had little or no prior contact or familiarity.

The concept application, or Stage 3, sends the student back into direct interaction with the new material or idea with the goal of abstracting the concept from its concrete example. This abstracting process is best realized in the survey course through the *explication de texte*, in which the student repeats and practices the techniques of analyzing the literary excerpt and its *forme* and *fond*. In this stage, the student will practice inductive and deductive thinking skills as he/she explicates Montesquieu's own use of

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French in an Academic Setting," *French Review*, 50 (1977), pp. 865-73; and E. Paul Torrance and R. E. Myers, *Creative Learning and Teaching* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1970). For an interesting example of moving the elementary student from the concrete level to a holistic relationship with poetry in general, see Richard Spuler, "Concrete Poetry and Elementary Language Study," *Teaching Language Through Literature*, 20 (1981), pp. 26-37. Finally, for an interesting discussion of altering concrete "cognitive codes" in adult learning experiences, see R. Bautier, "Pratiques de Communication et Processus Ideologiques," *Langue Française*, 36 (1977), pp. 93-98.

[7]Carol Herron, "Dewey's Theory of Language With Some Implications for Foreign Language Teaching," *Foreign Language Annals*, 14 (1981), pp. 293-98.

[8]Killian and Warrick, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-94.

these thought processes. Heuristic learning is thus taking place, as the student learns by doing, by engaging in precisely the same thinking processes about which he is learning. The student uses a certain thinking process to learn more about that thinking process (induction/deduction) and enhances his/her critical thinking skills in so doing. Having thught critically and analytically, the student has paved the way to making the creative, intuitive leap to the *esprit*, or spirit, of the laws about which Montesquieu is speaking in general, and the learning cycle has come full circle.

Such a logical organization of the survey course would appear to be requisite to developing critical thinking skills, for otherwise, the student, who may be operating exclusively on the concrete level vis à vis literature, will wander in the domain of abstractions without properly understanding the relationship of the part (the excerpt, in this case) to the whole (the corpus of French literary production and its sociocultural background). Foreign language surveys of literature organized logically and with a progression from the concrete to the abstract, naturally foster what has been termed "interhemispheric cooperation in thinking," that is, and interaction between the cognitive and the affective, the concrete and the abstract, the sequential and the holistic. As with learning a foreign language, closely reading a foreign language text and explicating it encompasses the entire mental process, including attention to grammar, speech, memory, meaning, and logic. Therefore, we as educators need not apologize for the basic survey format per se, even as we seek innovation or modification.

Through this mixture of chronological survey, generalizations concerning literary works and movements in their sociocultural setting, and close textual analysis and *explication de texte*, we create what I have termed elsewhere "a meld of European rationalism and formalism with American positivism and pragmatism," or the holistic interaction of the learner with a particular text. This melding of continental and American philosophies is assuredly one of the more interesting aspects of the current higher education picture, both here and abroad.[9] The broadly based survey course intrinsically involves interdisciplinary learning, drawing on the domains of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and aesthetics, to name only a few. With even slight modification, the traditional survey done in the foreign language sequence remains quietly, as always, on the cutting edge of developments in educational psychology. With an increased awareness of goals and objectives and of the processes of developmental learning on both the students' and professors' parts, the survey will continue to address the broadest concerns of the liberal arts education.

[9]For example, Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, Susan Fischer, et al, trans. (New York: Shocken Books, 1983), and Herron, *op. cit.* passim.